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# Review of *The Western Landscape in Cormac McCarthy and Wallace Stegner: Myths of the Frontier* by Megan Riley McGilchrist

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*The Western Landscape in Cormac McCarthy and Wallace Stegner: Myths of the Frontier.* By Megan Riley McGilchrist. New York: Routledge, 2010. x + 251 pp. Notes, bibliography, index. \$103.00.

Megan Riley McGilchrist sees the Vietnam War and the cultural upheaval it represents as a watershed event in understanding how the western novel treats the theme of landscape. She constructs her analysis through the writings of Wallace Stegner and the western novels of Cormac McCarthy, the former retaining a belief in the innate goodness of the land and the latter rejecting the benevolence of the natural world. McGilchrist argues that, as the fulfillment of the frontier ethos, the Vietnam War—absent in Stegner but present in McCarthy—changed life in the myth-imbued West. For McGilchrist, elements of the mythic West, both abhorrent and appealing, include boundless land, strong men, passive women, colonization of Indigenous peoples, hope, and grandeur.

In her assessment of the two authors' critiques of the frontier myth, McGilchrist offers sustained examinations of Stegner's *Angle of Repose*, *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*, and *The Spectator Bird* and of McCarthy's *All the Pretty*

*Horses*, *The Border Trilogy*, *Blood Meridian*, and *No Country for Old Men*. McCarthy's attitude toward the land is characterized by indifference, McGilchrist proposes, whereas Stegner exhibits an environmental awareness akin to spiritualism, but both question widely accepted mythic imagery, with McCarthy moving toward a reimagining of the images and myths. In fact, McGilchrist argues, rather than being antithetical, the authors represent an evolution in thought about the West, with Stegner's views about the land echoing the New England Transcendentalists, and McCarthy's approaching a postmodern critique. For McGilchrist, pairing these authors provides a new way of looking at the West and a fuller understanding of the inherent conflict in the western environment.

Further, McGilchrist observes, Stegner populates his world with men and women in meaningful relationships, whereas McCarthy's western novels take place largely outside stable domestic settings and are often characterized by misogyny. In his portrayal of women as fully realized characters interacting with the landscape, Stegner, according to McGilchrist, is a precursor of feminist interpretations of the West, such as New Western History's ecofeminism. McCarthy, associating women with landscape and landscape with women, creates protagonists who equate female betrayal with a sense of abandonment in the western landscape.

*The Western Landscape in Cormac McCarthy and Wallace Stegner* is not specifically about the Great Plains, except to the degree that the region is a part of the frontier West and the substantial influence that Stegner and McCarthy have had on Great Plains writers. McGilchrist's emphasis on understanding frontier myth in relation to the Vietnam War makes an important contribution to western studies.

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